

Eve of the National Day of Thanksgiving • November 23, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Philippians 4:6-20

“Think About These Things”

Paul didn't have it easy.

Once he started following Jesus, Paul's life looked rather different than it had before. He'd grown up under the tutelage of Gamaliel, one of the great teachers of God's Torah in Jerusalem in the first century. He had been zealous for his Jewish faith, having a measure of respect from the people in charge – so much so that he would act as the agent of the high priest in Jerusalem, persecuting those who followed Jesus as the Christ. But all that changed once Jesus called Paul to be an agent for the gospel. Paul suffered for the name of Jesus: he knew firsthand the pain of stoning, persecution, and captivity. In fact, he wrote this letter to the church in Philippi while under house arrest – likely in Rome while awaiting the possibility of execution. Paul had reason to be anxious.

Does anything have you feeling anxiety? Visiting family might not see eye-to-eye with your thoughts about life. Your health or the health of a loved one isn't what you want it to be. Or maybe thrown up in the air for you by the changing of administrations right here in our nation's capital. There's no shortage of reasons for being anxious these days.

While there might be many causes for feeling anxious, those causes generally boil down to some kind of uncertainty. Looking to the future, you're confronted with the realization that things might be out of your hands. You don't know how it's all going to work out. And thinking about that uncertainty, letting it stick to you, you become anxious.

Paul had reason to be anxious, but in his imprisonment, he wrote the Philippians a letter of encouragement. And we're not left to wonder about why: Paul looked to Jesus despite the uncertainty of the world, knowing in Christ how it would all work out. He encourages his fellow Christians to set their minds on the good that comes from God's hand as they journey through life.

“Finally, brothers (and sisters), whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (v. 8) We need this reminder. Even as Christians – maybe even especially as Christians – we seem to find it easier to spend time thinking about all the bad stuff in our uncertain world. It's all too easy to dwell on what you don't have, what you lack. (How much time will you spend thinking about what you need to buy in stores or online while all the sales are going over the next several days of this “Thanksgiving” weekend?) Commercialism aside, we tend to think more about sickness when it hits us than good health while we have it. Thoughts about your prosperity and comfort probably don't come to mind as easily as the ones concerning want and discomfort. But through Paul, God is calling each of us to give up our anxious thoughts for thanksgiving.

Don't misunderstand: Paul isn't encouraging a “Pollyanna” attitude of naïve optimism; rather, **this is about pondering the good with which God is constantly blessing His creation** – even when that good is coming through people who aren't Christians.

What is true? Oxford Dictionaries has selected “post-truth” as 2016's international word of the year. “Post-truth” is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” But even if the world disregards truth, that doesn't mean truth ceases to be. Some things are objectively true, including God's love for you in Christ. Ponder that truth, the truth that stands at the center of history, and consider what it means that the Creator entered into His creation to restore your relationship with Him.

What is honorable? Reputation is important. Are you going to choose the restaurant with the one-star Yelp review, or the five? If you have a choice, you're going to want to interact with people, places, and things that have a good reputation. The honorable keep their commitments, even at their own cost, reflecting God's faithfulness.

What is just? Fairness and righteousness are laudable, even if they might seem to be in short supply at times. Consider those situations where people are able to work and compete on an even field, where injustice is defeated, where the unscrupulous and deceptive are kept from continuing in cheating ways.

God expects all people to be just in our interactions with one another, yet how great is it when we see justice being done?

What is pure? Just look at a little baby or a young child at play, and you can see the joy of innocence. Look at the shelves of your supermarket, and you'll see how much producers emphasize the value of something that's "pure." When so much around us is compromised and corrupted in some way, purity and innocence give us a glimpse of what Eden was like when God created and "it was good."

What is lovely? It's probably not going to be that hard to think of these things. The word translated "lovely" here means delightful or pleasing. What brings joy? All of God's good gifts have the capacity for bringing joy into our lives, yet we often miss out on that joy because we spend more time thinking about what we want than what we've already been given. As our nation celebrates this national day of Thanksgiving, may you experience contentment, the joy of knowing that God has provided and continues to provide for you and all His creation – not only through great feasts of roasted meats and veggies and pies, or rest and relaxation on the couch as you watch football with friends and family – in more ways than we can count.

What is commendable and excellent and worthy of praise? What makes such a difference for you that you'd want to tell your friends about it? Our social media culture, though it often indulges in and encourages negativity, offers up scores of praiseworthy posts each day. It might come in the form of cute animals doing cute things – cat GIFs dominate the Internet, as-is – but those posts and reports of people doing good things, sharing kindness, speaking wisdom can be worth the sharing. They, too, point us to God's goodness and provision.

"Finally, brothers (and sisters), whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."
Think about Jesus. He's all of that. Ponder him; spend time contemplating his faithfulness and love for you. The God of peace will be with you – because He already is! Like Paul, like the Philippians, you will know the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, even in an uncertain world. Think about Jesus, and have a happy Thanksgiving, indeed!

To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. (v. 20)

Amen.